

RH2

As promised, today I am going to go into the topic of Teshuvah a bit more in depth. Today's style will be a bit like a Socratic crowdsourcing moment. Does anyone remember what I said about Teshuvah the other night?

What I said the other night was, and I quote, "Teshuvah/repentance in Judaism has four steps. First, you have to know that what was done was wrong. Second, you have to acknowledge this in the form of an apology to the person who was damaged by what was done. Third, you have to fix what was broken by what you did wrong. Fourth, you can never repeat that wrong action. Ever."

I am currently of the opinion that there are three possible recipients of the mistakes we might make. The three I came up with were 1) other people; 2) ourselves; and 3) God.

Let's dig a little deeper. Now, I don't want to get into the details here, in this large group. It is not safe spiritually or psychologically, so if you are feeling the need to confess to something, please restrain yourself. What I am looking for here are the kinds of areas in which we make mistakes when we deal with other people. You could get some ideas from the mistakes people have made in which you were harmed; you could also get some ideas from the mistakes you remember making in the past that involved other people.

Our brains, exemplified by our mouth and words, can be one source of mistakes. One sage in the relatively recent past made it one of his life goals to combat these kind of mistakes, and he wrote an entire book about gossip – "lashon hara" – and he called the name of the book he wrote "Hafetz Hayyim" referring to the verse in Psalms which says, approximately, "Whoever would like life should guard his tongue against evil and his lips from saying anything fraudulent." Whenever I speak with you about somebody else, this is gossip and to be avoided. You might think that speaking the truth would be ok, but if it involves somebody who is not involved in the conversation, then it usually isn't.

You may have heard of the tale of the feather pillow; fixing the effects of gossip is like finding the feathers and re-stuffing the pillow after a Wyoming wind.

The misuse of our bodies, in terms of directing them in violence against another can be another form of mistake. In this context I am not worried about any other form of misuse of the body – there are plenty of them, some of which are always true and others which are amenable to fluctuation. For the most part, our personal zone ends before it connects

with another person's actual body. Acting as if this is not true, and lashing out at another person physically, are mistakes that simply cry out for complete Teshuvah.

The last area I came up with is damage to another person's stuff. This is generally the kind of case we mention when teaching children about Teshuvah. There is almost no person alive who has not caused something of their parents to break. We can easily follow the train of Teshuvah in this scenario:

1. Oh, look! The ceiling light fixture is now in pieces upon the floor, because the ball which hit it was tossed gently by me.
2. Everyone is perfectly safe, but you might want to make sure that I vacuumed up the broken glass. You know how I think you are always nagging me about the ball playing in the house? It turns out that you might have actually been correct. I'm sorry that the light broke.
3. Are you sure it will take another ten years to work off the amount required to replace the light fixture?
4. No, my child, I cannot play ball in the house. Not even if it seems like a good idea – I do not have the clean-up equipment of the Cat in the Hat, even if you think I do.

We can also harm ourselves. This is when I think that the focus on Teshuvah is more valuable than simply a focus on forgiveness. It is easy to forgive something you don't think is a problem. How will you begin to do Teshuvah if you don't think what you did is a problem?

Sometimes we might act as if, when we think we are perfect, we should reprimand ourselves for being slightly less than perfect. In all those cases where that happens, we almost get to the point that nothing we do is going to be good enough, and we are never going to be good enough either. Taken to its farthest extremes, we co-opt God's interactions with our human nature, and where God has enabled Teshuvah, we would make Teshuvah impossible for ourselves. We would be in very good company, when we do something like this. In the days of the Talmud, Rabbi Akivah went with three other colleagues to approach God in a mystical fashion. One of them decided not to return at all; one of them did not return with all of their sensibilities; one of them, Elisha ben Abuya, came back and decided that acting in a Jewish manner was illogical. From that time forward, his opinions are quoted in the Talmud as being from "Acher" (Other). A number of times, his student Rabbi Meir asked him to do Teshuvah. His reply was that God would not be willing to accept his Teshuvah, and he knew this because of some studies he had overheard.

When we think we are as irredeemable as Acher did, then we are harming ourselves, and hopefully we will realize this and begin the process of Teshuvah by admitting that these opinions of ours are hurtful to ourselves.

Once we have worked with the mistakes we have made with other people, and those mistakes we have made which hurt ourselves, we can begin to work on our mistakes in areas concerning God. More specifically, we can work on those areas where we have fallen down in our side of the partnership we have with God in making the world a more ideal place.

That is our task here, you know. To be partners with God. Equals in terms of how what we do affects the world and each other, but not equals in the sense that God chooses, so to speak, to allow the world to improve at a human pace, as otherwise the world could be perfected immediately – but nobody would have learned a single thing in the process.

So, I invite you to spend some time between now and Yom Kippur reviewing the effects you have on each other and on yourselves. Then use Yom Kippur to focus on how to be a better partner with God.